

Where we are and where we want to be: How a Transfer of Authority by engaging Students as Partners can improve curriculum design in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: This paper will explore the value and educational significance of the transfer of authority that takes place when you engage Students as Partners in curriculum design. I will draw from my experience as a program director, trying to motivate faculty in creating a culture of quality, and after that, as part of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Malmo University and last but not least as a teacher and course coordinator. The core of the study is the transfer of authority that takes place when undergraduate students, in a design program, are trusted to re-design the curriculum. Time, or the fact that this takes place over time, not just in one course but throughout their education. A rhythm is created and there is a ritual aspect to consider. In this paper I will therefore draw from Richard Sennett (2012) conceptual framework of Rhythm and Ritual as well as from Selander and Kress, Design for Learning (2010)

The fact that we, the faculty, fell short, according to the students, opened up for the Students as Partners approach. In our bachelor program this is an early attempt to overcome the rigid attitude among faculty towards re-design of courses and welcome the eager enthusiasm we find in our students when it comes to putting in time and effort to analyze what has taken place in a course and how a re-design could improve their learning. This paper will therefore point out the way we failed as faculty and the way our students have helped us improve. Thereby hoping to not only present a direction towards success but also identify failure. The Swedish Research Council identifies in it's last rapport (2015) that much focus is put on success stories and less time is spent on analyzing failure.

By identifying failure and inviting students to transform patterns in our thinking, both in regards to re-design of curriculum and partnership, I hope to create a dialog with the audience. The benefits I have identified may be regarded as inspiration and the candour by which I openly display our failure is an attempt to open up for discussion.

1 INTRODUCTION

Frustrated and confused over the fact that all my best intentions had zero impact on the group of teachers I was trying to work with as a program director, I started to research what had been done by others and what paths I could find and where they would lead. A lot of comfort came from Gibbs. In 2013 he wrote in the International Journal for Academic Development:

“There has been an increasing recognition of the limits on the extent to which individual teachers can change or improve in effective ways if their colleagues and other courses do not, and on the difficulty of innovation and permanent change where the local culture and values are hostile to such change, or even hostile to taking teaching seriously”.

Finding comfort in the fact that research shows that there is hostility, the hostility is not a figment of my imagination. During the years that I have acted as program director, I have often wondered how it is possible that educational development, or an ongoing attempt to develop and improve our program, could provoke so much anger and irritation. At the same time, to simply stop and let everything be was not an option.

I looked a little further and turned to sociologist Richard Sennett. In his book Together, Richard Sennett talks about the decline of cooperation. He then goes on to talk about the necessity of cooperation being “an earned experience rather than just thoughtless sharing” (Sennett, 2012) the reason being that in life “we prize what we have struggled to achieve” (Sennett, 2012). Since this takes some effort, rehearsal is necessary in his view and we rehears by going through motions of ritual.

Ritual makes way for cooperation since “rituals enables expressive cooperation in religion, in the workplace, in politics and in community”.

I would like to add: in education.

In doing so I would like to juxtapose Sennetts writings to the concept of *Designs for learning* (Selander and Kress, 2010). *Designs for learning* highlights the material and temporal conditions for learning as well as the learning activity itself. The use of modes and media in processes of interpretation and identity construction is here central for the understanding of learning activities. I find this very useful since I fear that we as teachers, in HE, fail to recognize learning activities when they do not fit our preconceived ideas. As pointed out by Selander and Kress (2010), learning is seen as an activity where signs in different media (information) are elaborated, and where the forming of new signs in new media (reconfiguration and re-contextualisation) takes place.

Not being able to interest my colleges and therefor failing in my duty as a program director, I turned to the students. As luck would have it, during this time, we were invited to the Change Institute under the direction of Mick Healy and I attended the workshop with two of my students in May 2016. This became the beginning of the transformation, and it is the first results of that transformation that this paper is describing.

In this paper I refer to partnership as it was presented to me at the Change Institute, a process of engagement rather than a product. It is a way of doing things rather than an outcome in itself. Partnership in learning and teaching may take many forms, and increasingly students are engaged in areas in which traditionally they have been excluded (Healy, Flint and Harrington, 2014)

2 BACKGROUND

In Sweden HE is funded by the Government. Universities are autonomous but answers to the Government when it comes to quality. In order to issue a degree you need to prove that you deliver an education equivalent to the level in question, Bachelor level in our case. The burden of proof lies on the educational program that is being evaluated.

Malmö University is a young university with five multidisciplinary faculties and a heterogenic student population. The university strives to make a difference in society and to prepare students to become change agents. The confidence I have in my students and the transformation that takes place when you transfer authority lays the foundation in my earlier writings *Students as Agents of Change* (Brost, 2015)

The university has extensive collaboration with outside partners and strong focus on developing for student active, challenge-based learning. Even so, the students are not considered as partners within the university in the same way as they are outside of the university, in spite of what is written in in The Strategy 2020, which claims that Malmö University students shall be actively encouraged to participate in the university’s developmental efforts. I have made some earlier attempts to actively encourage my students to take charge, *Walk this Way* (Brost, 2016)

The displacement of design education into HE and the rules and regulations that that entails is the core of many of the problems our faculty have in our daily practice, mostly since they are seldom addressed. When our students complain, these rules and regulations are held as a shield to defend our selves with rather than focusing on what the students are really saying.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concepts of ‘education’ and ‘learning’ are strongly linked to institutional practices. In the Selander and Kress (2010) model the rules and regulations are addressed, such as budget, hours and number of assessments. These are the very circumstances that we have to practice in and accept rather than ignore or fight, the reason being our students. They too have to live by and accept the fact that they actually have applied to a bachelor program in HE.

According to Selander and Kress (2010), the *Designs for learning* model ask of the teacher to be the designer of the curriculum. The teacher has the authority to ask how she or he can use material resources and the structures of power in a specific environment. Therefore, it is the perspective of Selander and Kress (2010) that will create the backdrop to my discussion in this paper.

The model that Selander and Kress (2010) put forward in *Designs for learning* is the model that the students are introduced to in order to evaluate the course they have just taken part in and then take the consequence of their own comments in order to re-design the course to better support their learning.

Designs for learning is a useful tool since hostility often is expressed in terms of “there is not enough hours” “we have too many students, too little time” “we work in a very rigid system, no flexibility” Before writing this paper I sat down with the teachers who has resisted me for years (18th of January 2017), told them that I was writing about my struggle and the energy I have found in working with students as partners. I asked them about their reflections in retrospect. Three of them were present and knowing that I was going to use their comments, the answer was that “we are touched by what you are trying to do, but there simply is not enough hours and Malmö university is not concerned with these issues, the system is too rigid”

Selander and Kress do not shy away from the fact that in a formal educational setting we have purpose and defined curricula, institutional norms. Learning is process, and they describe the process as characterized by the transforming and forming of signs. The expectations that are embedded are learning outcomes. The model is in two parts and the primary transformation unit describes the first cycle. The teacher creates the staging of what is going to take place. The teacher has a purpose and an aim with this staging and controls the resources. The teacher is familiar with the institutional rules and regulations, and understands how to navigate within these rules and regulations. In the first cycle, interest and motivation are created. It is the teacher’s job to create understanding for what is going to take place.

The secondary transformation unit, the second cycle, starts with the students presenting their work. If the goals, as well as the expectations of the process and the product, are clearly defined, both students and teachers will have a powerful tool for reflection and evaluation. Students are expected to present their understanding and reflect on both the process and their understanding. During the whole sequence, teachers make interventions and have the possibility to reflect on the signs and indications of learning that take place.

In his writings on cooperation Sennett refers to a ritual aspect of cooperation, that it takes effort and time. I have found rhythm and ritual to be useful tools when working with students in complex project where they take on real life challenges in collaboration with clients and try to come up with solutions through design on said problems. In creating courses to support this step-by-step exploration I have come to believe that rhythm and ritual lies in the structure you as a teacher create and that rehearsal is embedded in that structure (Brost, 2015).

In rehearsal and repetition an arena is created to negotiate the transition from HE to industry. What if we turn to our own practice as teachers and apply Sennetts concept of rhythm and ritual on course design?

In my work with Students as Agents of Change I have come to realize that through the process the students become more comfortable with change, and become less hesitant in terms of taking action. They do not await instructions instead they start to create instructions of their own. Curriculum becomes in these courses a negotiated curriculum.

If there was only a way to make teachers into change agents, I thought, but then slowly realized that I was thinking about this the wrong way. There was no reason, to create change agents in our faculty, when they already existed in my students!

4 METHOD

In the spring of 2016, we were introduced to the method of working with Students as Partners. In my introduction I referred the intentions of Malmö University and the fact that the first group that went to the Change Institute was the Pro Vice Chancellor, Head of Center for Teaching and Learning, me and two of my students would act as a signal that this was of interest on all levels.

During our week in Hamilton, Canada, at the Change Institute we were introduced to the concept that “partnership represents a sophisticated and effective approach to student engagement for two connected reasons. First, it foregrounds qualities that put reciprocal learning at the heart of the relationship, such as trust, risk, difference, empowerment, inter-dependence and agency, allowing us to go beyond a consumerist relationship, and its critique, in meaningful and relevant ways. And

second, partnership is different to other more traditional relationships of power in HE, which means that it is often experienced as an unfamiliar way of working, learning and thinking. Through this difference, partnership raises awareness of the implicit assumptions about each other, and about the nature of learning and teaching, which would otherwise remain below the surface. In becoming more aware of one's assumptions and attitudes, and how they influence learning and teaching relationships, greater choice is afforded about how to act and relate to one another and the type of learning environments and spaces they are created. In sum, a partnership approach is valuable because it enables a more authentic engagement with the very nature of learning itself, understood as an experimental process of reflection and transformation, in relation to oneself and others. Hence, we speak *of engagement through partnership*" (Healy, Flint and Harrington, 2014)

"The research suggest that where partnerships are focused on educationally meaningful activities, the benefits are multiple for all parties. Never the less, many remain to be convinced. Some questions whether students have the expertise, knowledge and experience to be fully engaged in partnership in learning and teaching". (Cook Sather, Bovill and Felten , 2014)

The work that we had done since the May 16 workshop in Canada, in our program board, in evaluation and re-design of course plans is effective, engaging and fruitful. The students want to get involved and are prepared to commit. We are in the very early stages but even during this first year it has been important to establish a structure and before we do the work, they are given lectures on Sennett and Selander and Kress. By using the Selander and Kress model they are introduced behind the scenes and presented what takes place before a course is given. I considered this as a transfer of authority. In that transfer you establish responsibility and trust.

5 RESULT

I started this paper by wondering what would happen if I tried to create a junction between Sennett and Selander and Kress. Over the years I have put a lot of work in to finding ideas and models to inspire the teachers that I have been working with. Sometimes being very pragmatic and trying to talk to their sense of comfort, life could be so much easier if courses were planned in a constructive way and they themselves knew what they were going to assess and by which criteria when they entered the classroom.

By the transfer of authority created, working with Students as Partners we are out of the loop and on our way. I am comfortable with the sociological approach to education and the idea of reconstruction, remediation and reconfiguration as described by Sennett (2012). He is concerned with the skill of cooperation. In his writings he also stresses rhythm and ritual as important factors in collaboration. My interpretation is that rhythm and ritual can create structure in a learning situation. But it can also, when working with students as partners, mean that there is a structure created with the students on how to evaluate and then take the consequences of the evaluation when a re-design the course is made with Students as Partners.

We are fortunate to have ambitious students, ambitious in the sense that they are very committed to their education. The students are not critical of the content of the courses. By this I mean the assignments or projects that they do. What they point out as being problems are the introductions, what Selander and Kress (2010) call the staging of the transformational cycles. Very seldom do the students feel that it is clear why they are asked to do something. Apparently we do not succeed in communicating this to the students. They are thrown into something; they might enjoy it, but they ask us, and themselves, 'what was I supposed to learn by this?'

The second problem is the feedback: too little, too late and too general. Students are critical about how feedback is delivered. Students point out that it is too general and not something they feel that they can build on.

The third problem is assessment and grading, described by the students as 'we do something; we get our grade when the course is over, no explanation no motivation or reasoning'. This means that there is no reflection, which is a big part of the model's second transformational cycle, and in turn no clear motivation for the grading that will help them to aim for something. There is no transparency in terms of criteria and the students leave the courses not really knowing where they stand.

The Selander and Kress (2010) model contains two full circles. If we skip the introduction, the staging of what we think we are teaching in a course, we in fact slice the first circle in half, hereby leaving the students without the *why*. We then look at what they do and assess, again slicing the second circle in half. Feedback, and the needed reflection on that feedback, never takes place. The student gets the grade and the course is over. The answer to our problems came in the approach Students as Partners. We are still in the early stages but during the last year that we spent with Students as Partners, we have been able to address these issues. What was earlier met with hesitation and hostility from teachers, mainly out of fear of an increased workload, is now starting to become a dialog with students. The dialog is already resulting in a re-design of courses, done in collaboration with the students. We are also entering the very early stages of a re-design of the entire program.

Most importantly, the students are now educated in the staging of a course and thereby invited behind the scenes, so to speak. With that knowledge they have power tools that they have not had before. Power tools that they have been given as a transfer of authority. *The Designs for learning* model is very effective but only when it is put to use. The students find it very useful since they, through the model, have a language to talk about their experience. They find it worthwhile since, they as partners are invited to solve the problems that they have pinpointed by using the model.

The method of Students as Partners highlights the subtle, but very important difference between an institution that listen to the student voice and an institution that gives students the opportunity to explore areas that they believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to bring about the required change as it has been introduced to us at the Change Institute. In this paper I present an early example on what will take place when you transfer authority and regard your students as partners in curriculum design.

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